



BEFORE cornea transplant, Dr. Sandra Belmont explains operation to Sarah Peregrina.

## Doc gives her sight

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Most mothers wait nine months to see their babies. Sarah Peregrina, 22, waited nearly two years.

"I was 14 years old when I started to lose my sight, little by little," remembers Peregrina, whose daughter, Leslie, is 18 months old. "For the last six, seven years, I haven't seen any faces, just shadows."

Last week, however, Peregrina emerged from the darkness. Diagnosed with keratoconus, a progressive disease that distorts the shape of the cornea, she underwent a transplant at the Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital. The result was, in her words, a miracle.

"Everybody had been going, 'Your baby's



AFTER surgery, Sarah Peregrina has bandage removed (top), then discovers she can see in test. Finally, she takes first look at daughter.

so pretty," says Peregrina, who lives with her family in Brooklyn. "I didn't know. Then my baby was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes, and I cried."

The miracle for Peregrina, a Mexican native, was not only that sight was restored to her right eye, but also that the operation took place at all.

Legally blind for several years, she had been unable to attend school or hold down a job, drifting from jewelry repair to baby-sitting and ultimately, to unemployment. She also was disqualified from health insurance, and Medicaid did not come through.

"I was so sad," she says. Then, she met Dr. Sandra Belmont, who is affiliated with the hospital and agreed to perform the cornea transplant free of charge. The Eye-Bank for Sight Restoration, through which she received the tissue, also agreed to waive its \$1,275 processing fee.

"Being a woman myself with two children, I really had to relate to her," says Belmont, who performs corneal surgery at several New York hospitals. "And I really wanted to help — that's why I went into medicine."

Even with the financing settled, however, Peregrina was forced to wait because of a tissue shortage in the New York area. In the meantime, her sight worsened — and disaster struck more than once.

"I dressed my baby in bright colors so I could see her, but I took her to the park one day and I put the wrong baby in the stroller," she recalls of an incident in Gravesend three months ago. "I put the bottle in the wrong baby's mouth and started to go, and the mother came up and started screaming at me, and called the police. It was so bad."

Another time, Peregrina was struck by a car after a hospital visit — and her daughter was nearly hit, too. "I pushed the stroller away, and it hit me," she says. "I had to go right back to the hospital."

The cornea that finally arrived was from a 23-year-old man in Denver who had died in an accident. Although there are few requirements for eye donors — they can range in age from 1 to 75, and do not have to have matching eye color or perfect vision — Belmont says she tried to match the age so the tissue would last throughout Peregrina's life.

Now that vision is restored in her right eye, Peregrina will continue therapy, wearing a patch and dark glasses for several weeks. Then the process begins again, as she seeks a donor for the left eye.

Until then, she's simply enjoying the view — not to mention catching up on what she missed. "My mother and father look different, a little bit older," says Peregrina, who hopes to go to medical school someday. "Yesterday I was walking along 18th St., and it was so incredible. All these things in the store I hadn't seen."

And what about looking in the mirror? "I just laugh."

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